# MANAGING POWER RELATIONS IN DOCTORAL EDUCATION THROUGH RESEARCH MENTORING

**OBIORAH, ADORA, C**
**OLIBIE, EYIUCHE IFEOMA (PHD)**
**&**
**REV. FR. OFOJEBE WENCESLAUS (PHD)**

***Abstract***
*Research is central to doctoral education in universities around the globe. The ability of a student to successfully complete the doctoral research is largely dependent on the power relations between the student and the supervisor. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how power relations could be managed through research mentoring. Drawing mainly on the power theory of Foucault, this paper examines the power relations existing in research supervision. It explores the importance of mentoring as a key to managing such power relations. Mentoring is an empowering process of nurturing students with sufficient tools for research. The conditions for managing power relations in research mentoring as discussed in the paper include supervisors' knowledge, skills and experience, leadership, communication, and student responsibility.*

## Introduction

Doctoral education at universities is an experience designed to prepare students for a lifetime of productivity, scholarship and research. Doctoral students are expected to internationalise knowledge and research in order to enhance their academic excellence and the relevance of their contribution to societies. The doctorate is rooted in the birth of the European university system in the thirteenth century, when a doctorate was considered a licence to teach, rather than recognition of research expertise or achievements. Botas (2009) noted that the first modern 'research university' was founded in Berlin in 1810 where, the award of a doctorate required attendance at seminars, submission of a thesis, and the passing of an oral examination. This traditional eurocentric PhD objective as characterised by Park (2005:104) was the production of "a piece of work that changes the course of human knowledge".

However, there is a shift occurring in the perception of the role and utility of doctoral education. The European University Association (EUA, 2005:2) agreed on a definition and description of doctoral education which has become known as the Salzburg declaration as follows: "Doctoral education's core component is the advancement of knowledge through original research. At the same time, it is

recognised that doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia". Inherent in this conceptualisation is the admittance that the contemporary PhD is no longer to be regarded as the necessary training and gateway to a career in academia alone but must involve a knowledge and skill development experience that has relevance and application to wider industry.

There are two models of doctorates offered in Universities. According to Botas (2009), one is an apprentice model where the student is typically attached to one supervisor/mentor within one institution and focuses on a specialised research programme leading to the delivery of doctoral thesis. The other is a convergence of a formally structured educational model which involves dedicated modular (taught courses and seminar) advancement before an empirical research project is embarked upon. In both models, a research is carried out by the doctoral student and presented as a thesis or dissertation which would be completed within a 3 year cycle. The research thesis or dissertation is reviewed by a noted academic and an oral defence completed the PhD process.

Hence, doctoral research represents a core of excellence in prioritized areas of the nation, which can generate high impact research publications. It is also intended to attract the best brains for teaching and research in producing high standard manpower for industries and firms (Buckley, Brogan, Flynn, Monks, Hogan, & Alexopulous, 2009). It is a process or step in the training of a researcher where the focus is on the knowledge and competencies developed within a specified period of time

Individuals pursue their doctorate for a variety of reasons: some for personal attainment, some for status and recognition, some for a credential to achieve an upward mobility goal, and some to become faculty members in the academy. However, numerous studies have pointed out that there are high proportions of doctoral students who fail to complete their studies within the time given (Uluslararası, 2007; Onuh, 2008, Buckley, et al, 2009). Others complete their course work but abandon their research. Some others present their research work at oral defence only to be told that their work is not up to acceptable standards. Many factors can contribute to these problems and one of such factors is the kind of power relations in the research supervision.

**Concept of Power Relations**

Power relations are a very controversial concept because of its omnipresence, its changeability, its reversibility, and its instability. Lukes (1978: 34) emphasised the imposing characteristic of power in relationships, when he defined his concept of power relations by saying that: A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests. Foucault (1994:11) conceptualised power relations as the desire to control another's behaviour by saying that:

"In human relations, whatever they are - whether it is a question of communicating verbally..., or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship - power is always present: it means the relationships in which one wishes to direct the behaviour of another".

Relations of power are everywhere because we cannot conceive of any human interaction or relationship in which the exercise of power would not be present. In other words, to socialise, human beings need to relate to one another. This happens in research supervision because the research supervisor is assumed to be highly knowledgeable, experienced and has authority to direct a doctoral student in conducting a research. Foucault (1980) connected power and knowledge. He noted that the connection between power and knowledge can be a vicious circle: the more power, the more knowledge; the more knowledge, the more power. As power recreates itself, knowledge of this power has also to evolve to make resistance possible. Mayo (1998) drew attention to the fact that the more power infuses everything, the deeper the knowledge of the subject about itself becomes. His argument establishes the cycle that power and knowledge go through constant change. (Tanabe, 1999) added that a person wilding power over another uses various tools which Foucault (1980) proposed as a capillary theory of power.

**Capillary Theory of Power**

In this theory, Foucault was concerned with the capillary mechanisms of power as tools through which power is exercised. These capillary mechanisms extend the relations of power to the discursive, practical, material, intellectual, and psychological (Foucault; 1980: 39). This form of power touches peoples' bodies, inserts itself into their actions, attitudes, their learning processes and their everyday lives (Rosser, 2003). The understanding of this capillary form of power is essential to the understanding of the relationship between supervisors and students during the research process, and in particular to the understanding of research supervision as a mentoring process. The tools/mechanisms through which supervisors may exercise power in research supervision are:

**Authority:** Supervisors' authority is maintained by social and institutionalised mechanisms that allow supervisors to exercise their power based on status quo and on their specialist knowledge or expertise (Mayo, 1998). This tool/mechanism is also responsible for maintaining supervisors' privileges, custom and tradition (Buttery, Richter & Filho, 2005). By maintaining supervisors' privileges, their authority is also maintained, and remains unexamined, in the sense that one never challenges a supervisor's expertise or specialist knowledge.

**Influence/ manipulation:** Supervisors can make suggestions, give advice, persuade and convince students to make some decision, to take some action, to join a group or to support a decision. According to Tanabe (1999), this tool/ mechanism can also be exercised indirectly by an authority, when the supervisor who has authority is using her/his expertise or specialist knowledge to persuade the student to make a decision that will directly or indirectly benefit the supervisor who is exercising influence/ manipulation. It consists of the provision and transfer of information from one person to another. Transmission and provision of information is the work of the supervisor in higher education.

**Bargaining/ negotiation:** Supervisors negotiate with students, in order to get students to do what they, the supervisors, want them to do. In this negotiation, Bar (2006) noted that a supervisor will offer individual students some privileges that the student was seeking and interested in (such as providing materials or granting approval for a research proposal), and those privileges, when given to a student, will not jeopardise a supervisor's position and interests. It is most frequently exercised as a disciplinary tool, where the supervisor controls the student's behaviour, attitudes and engagement in the research process, but also it is exercised when supervisors and students negotiate work to be done at every stage of the research.

**Surveillance**: Supervisors exercise a constant close control by observing, supervising and monitoring carefully students' attitudes, behaviour, movements, actions, activities, skills, knowledge, performance, product, engagement and learning, with the intention to increase production, engagement and learning in a shorter period of time (Focault, 1994). It can be done through coaching of students' work, through one-to-one tutorial (scrutiny of students' learning, knowledge, production of knowledge and learning needs); through observation of students' engagement, participation and interest in the research, and mainly through examination/assessment of the students' research product.

**Coercion:** Supervisors are capable of punishing or threatening to punish students, with the intention of having a student comply with the supervisor's directives or interests. Botas (2009) noted that through coercion a supervisor finds his/her way to control the psyche (mind) and/or the physical (body) of a student. Coercion, in the past, was the principal tool of teaching, i.e. coercion was the main pedagogical style for teaching students. Today, research supervisors are no longer allowed to relieve their frustrations on students through physical punishment or even the threat of it. However, punishment and threat of punishment are still present in education and thriving because the dynamics of power, through coercion, has evolved and recreated itself to fulfil the demands of new powers in the education system: Supervisors' control over the grading and the establishment of deadlines for handing in students' work or drafts; and supervisors' control of students' entire future.
This theory of power relations apply to doctoral research supervision in Nigeria today. Majority of supervisors consider knowledge as property, because the ownership of knowledge gives and maintains for supervisors, their comfortable position of power. Supervisors' influence/manipulation persuades students to comply with the supervisor's agenda or interests. Supervisors use their authority to influence and manipulate students' decisions, but supervisors' coercive power can also influence and manipulate students' decisions. The grading power - coercive power - of supervisors can influence students to go for the right answers to achieve learning or to comply with supervisors' agendas. Supervisors' bargaining/negotiation is mostly exercised through the supervisors' desire to control students' behaviour, attitudes and engagement in the classroom. To a lesser degree, bargaining/negotiation can be manifested in supervisors and students negotiating work to be done, dates for handing in work, and to a limited extent, the methodological process to be carried out

in the research, in so far as it does not jeopardise supervisors' power. Supervisors fulfil some of students' requests, in order to pursue their larger agenda. Supervisors' surveillance/supervision, this grey area in Supervisors' pedagogical styles, is commonly exercised by supervisors to keep students under close control. Through it, Supervisors will observe, supervise and monitor students' skills, knowledge, performance, product, engagement, learning and learning needs in the classroom and/or in tutorials. It can be manifested through the list of recommended readings for the research, mainly when the texts, articles or books are highlighted by the supervisors. It can also be manifested through invitations to students to comment on some issues presented in the recommended readings. Supervisors' coercion, as mentioned before, is also commonly exercised by Supervisors in the classroom when Supervisors punish or threaten to punish, physically or psychologically, with the intention of making students comply with their interests. The threat of punishment, which is the psychological level of supervisors' coercion, can be manifested through supervisors pressuring students to complete a research task with a given time. Coercion can be exercised through supervisors' advice to students on how to produce work and also through telling students what is acceptable and what is not when doing their work.

**Mentoring: A Key to Managing Power Relations in Research Supervision**

Effective mentoring of research students is an imperative in managing power relations in research supervision. It is acknowledged as a crucial factor in the latter success completion of the Ph.D. Research mentoring is concerned as the mechanics of ensuring that the students make good progress towards completion of their research. It is often described as an interpersonal relationship characterized by terms including “emotional,” “caring,” and “chemistry” (Hand & Thompson, 2003). Some authors described it as a long term nurturing commitment with a mixture of good parent and good friend, as well as “supporter,” “collaborator,” and “advisor” (Grossman & Valiga, 2000; Rosser, 2003). Other authors described the relationship as one of mutual respect with the goal of learning, advancement, and mastery and the mentor as a “coach,” “teacher,” “evaluator,” and “preceptor” (Restifo & Yoder, 2004, Buttler et al, 2005).

According to some literature, having a mentor has numerous benefits including decreasing the anxiety levels of students, learning new information, increasing success and achievements, providing networking, learning from the mentor’s works and mistakes, and increasing student retention (Shelton, 2003; Forfas, 2008). Johnsrud (1990) contended that mentoring relationships between research supervisors and their students are a significant means for identifying and developing the scholarly potential of students as well as for perpetuating the traditional norms and values of academic life and intellectual inquiry. Buckley, et al (2009) believed that mentoring is a means by which the protégé is sponsored for research positions, coached to succeed in research and publishing, and taught the various aspects of academic research. In essence, mentoring is most often a one-to-one relationship, and if that relationship continues to develop in a positive manner, then it can eventually

evolve into one of interdependence and collegiality. What is most important here is that the supervisor faculty member who is working most closely with the student must ensure that an appropriate socialization and mentoring process is taking place.
When research supervision is seen as an act of mentoring, power becomes changeable, reversible, and instable. It is no longer a self-contained and self-sufficient entity. Power relations are exercised in dynamic ways, such that the boundaries between the powerful and powerless are not entirely explicitly delineated, but subtly manifested in sophisticated ways. The dynamics of power relations in research mentoring allow it to move from A to B and from B to A, while both are interacting with one another. Such interactions promote creativity (Olibie and Akudolu, 2009). Without this interaction, mentoring would not exist. Shelton (2003) also argued that mentoring has become an important method of managing power relations to supporting doctoral students in their research works. This method has moved the concept of doctoral education from passive lectures, information receiving and criticisms, towards more interactive student learning.

The quality of power dynamism in the student-supervisor relationship is the fundamental and most important element of the mentoring experience. Mentoring allows the student to have reciprocal power in the supervisor-student interaction. Mentoring provides positive aspects to managing power relations. According to Uluslararası, (2007:18), some of them include that:

"Mentoring relationships provide private feedback that is reality based, provides nurturing, provides room to explore, security, provides someone to talk to, lasting relationships, guidance in any new situation, learning opportunities through positive and negative experiences, encouragement, and support, gives direction yet also helps them explore, thus it also promotes independence rather than dependence".

Through effective research mentoring, Universities are expected to be engines of growth of the nation where scholars and students exchange ideas as well as conduct research in a conducive environment that nurtures exploration and creativity in discovering knowledge and creating wealth, leading towards an improved quality of life. Through research mentoring, universities are also expected to be leaders in innovation, produced world class research outputs and Nobel Prize winners.

**Conditions for Managing Power Relations in Research Mentoring**

Managing power relations is a process of ensuring that a supervisor's power is exercised in a way that facilitates the students' ability to conduct a successful research. To manage power relations in a way that promotes research mentoring, the intention is to establish a supervisor-student relationship much like one in which a parent nurtures children (Schultz, 2004). Hand & Thompson (2003:106) noted that managing power relations in research mentoring involves using power in "a manner that builds respect and provides a holistic approach and the opportunity to prove self with individualized and honest feedback." Instituting and maintaining those relationships could be burdensome and possibly not even feasible, given time constraints and the reality of what a teacher-student relationship demands. However,

literature indicates that the following conditions may foster the management of power relations in research mentorship:

1) **Supervisors knowledge, experience and skill:** Effective research mentorship requires supervisors to be knowledgeable and skilled in the research field (McQueeney, 1996).They are also expected to take the lead in establishing a quality of relations which will give their students access to the knowledge and skills they possess (Buttler et al, 2005) and to have counselling skills (Hockey, 1997). Students not only expect their supervisors to have the knowledge and ability to supervise in a particular area of research but also want them to be reasonable, serious, supportive of their work in good times and bad, and approachable. Botas (2009) considered that supervisors should act as mentors and that a mentoring relationship requires mutual aspect based on high academic standards, similar interests and regular contact. According to Moses (1994), supervisors should at least have an equivalent degree to the one the student is studying for and, if this is not the case then, they must have a solid background of research involvement and publications. To mentor effectively, one has to be a competent researcher and to be able to reflect on research practices and analyze the knowledge, techniques and methods that make them effective.

Taking a slightly different view, Frischer and Larsson (2000) suggested that a faculty member ought to be recommended to supervise a doctoral research based on the key factor of whether he/she has an established research record and is continuing to contribute to the development of his or her discipline. This takes account of whether the person has recently published research, holds research grants and is invited to speak at conferences in their own country or abroad. Yeatman (1995) gave a similar view, stating that good supervisors must have a track record in successfully bringing through a large number of Ph.D candidates. In other words, it will be sufficient for the supervisor to be competent in the general area of the student's research even if not expert in the detailed area of the thesis topic.

***2)*** **Leadership**: The primary function of mentoring of all types is leadership, plus the encouragement and recognition of leadership in other people, either on the professional staff or among students. Frischer and Larsson (2000) described three different patterns of leadership, which are called democratic, authoritarian and laissez-faire leader. The democratic leader is characterised by devolution of powers through his encouragement of discussions and collaborative decisions in the choice of activities. He cares for the students by checking their achievements and commenting upon them. The authoritarian leader exerts absolute powers. He makes decisions for the group all by him/her and shows others what to do. The laissez-faire leader hands power entirely to the student provides the students complete freedom of action, hands out materials but largely avoids participating in research work and checking and does not evaluate and comment upon their work, except when asked.

The authoritarian leader was found to achieve a great quantity of work and the democratic a greater quantity and quality of work. The laissez-faire leadership resulted in both a low quantity and quality of work and should be avoided at all times. In mentoring, a great quantity and quality of work is needed, so the democratic

leadership is the most desirable. Cullen, Pearson, Saha, & Spear (1994) noted indicators of effective power relations in mentoring using four major categories:
(i) Category 1- Supervisory style reflected in level of direction; regular meetings; making time for student; allowing students to develop original ideas; flexibility in project choice; encouraging ideas and individuality; and to a lesser extent promoting close interaction with other academics; assistance in conference attendance and publishing before completion of Ph.D candidature;
(ii) Category 2- Supervisor competence with respect to student project as reflected in scientific competence; familiarity with the relevant academic literature; expertise in the area of the project; and awareness of science overseas;
(iii) Category 3- Supervisor characteristics and attitude as reflected in approachability and friendliness; being supportive and positive; being open minded and prepared to acknowledge error; being organized; thorough; stimulating; and conveying enthusiasm. Other areas of importance may be political compatibility and a lack of obsession in supervisor with wealth and recognition; and
(iv) Category 4- Supervisor academic and intellectual standing as reflected in an ability to be a creative/flexible thinker; intellectual excellence; consistent involvement in own research; good publications record; seeking/achieving external funding; and to a lesser extent being professionally interactive and influential in the department.
These categories have been supported independently by researchers over the years. For example, the importance of academic standing was highlighted by Moses (1994) and supervisory competence by Uluslararası (2007). Leadership in research mentoring is acknowledged as a crucial factor in the latter success completion of the Ph.D. Supervisors should provide leadership by acting as role models.
**3) Good communication** between students and their supervisor is the most important condition in power analysis. Without open and honest communication it is very difficult to identify the nature of and reasons for that shortfalls perceived by student. Both parties should be open to criticism, willing to listen to each other and to talk openly and be trustworthy (Hockey, 1996). According to Botas (2009) personality factors that might involve personality clashes, barriers to communication due to age, cultural, or language differences, or personal differences in the approach to work, are to be recognised and managed.
**4) Students' Responsibilities**

The student is the main person responsible for his/her Ph.D research. Doing a Ph.D clearly indicates that this is a student's own research and work (Rosser, 2003). What doctoral students put into their preparation and socialization is what they will get out of it. The supervisor's perception of the student responsibility also determines the power relations in research mentoring. Moses (1994) argued that supervisors expect students to be diligent, conscientious, hardworking, energetic, keen, tenacious and conscientious and to have a sense of urgency. They also expect students to be enthusiastic and motivated towards research work, to be pleasant at work and to contribute to a good working environment.

Research students have to take responsibility for managing their own learning and getting a Ph.D. They are also responsible for determining what is required as well as for carrying it out, and must always keep in touch in regular meetings with the supervisors. Also, student should give continual feedback, so that the supervisor can give informed instruction (Buttler et al, 2005). A good student should be creative and have a broader view of academic training in the discipline in which he/she is undertaking the research. Students are expected to gain expertise in the research process so that their talents can be observed in as many different settings as possible (Park, 2005). They also need to work with faculty who model collegiality by contributing their time to serve on graduate student committees and participate in activities within the university and surrounding local and national communities.

Doctoral students need to read broadly and learn the work of those exemplary scholars who are writing on the important and defining topics and issues of the day. These readings should be in addition to formal coursework. Students need to think about where and how to pursue all forms of academic socialization, training, and preparation available as part of their graduate experience. They need to work with, and emulate, those who are productive scholars so that they can learn to become researchers. They need to work with exemplary mentors who love to motivate and work with students, so that they can develop skill in research. Working closely with a professor or experienced faculty member to learn about the various elements of a research article is invaluable. Where possible, the student would duplicate manuscripts to read, evaluate, and assess.

In addition to working with those faculty members who are active researchers, doctoral students need to attend and participate, as much as possible, in national research meetings and conferences. In this sense, professional development include attending conferences, writing papers for publication, attending seminars and workshops, making presentations, networking with other researchers, working as a research assistant and teaching (Bar, 2006). Attending a national meeting allows doctoral students the opportunity to observe respected researchers within their field and to listen in or and even participate in important national debates on important issues. Reading a paper at a conference is a valuable experience in presenting ones ideas to a critical audience. It is also important for students to know their field of study and be professional about the presentation of their work.

Doctoral students are expected to "hit the ground running" (Whitt, 1991:177) with respect to their research. The dissertation will serve as a treasure trove of data that can be mined by the student to produce one or two articles to hold them over until they can establish a research agenda and get their writing and publishing cycle in full gear. It is also advisable to always to try and keep something in review. This way the doctoral student will always have something in the research cycle (e.g., obtaining data, writing a conference proposal, presenting the work at a national conference, revising the conference paper to an article, submitting the work to a refereed journal, revising and resubmitting the manuscript, and, finally, getting it accepted for publication). It is the student's responsibility to determine what is required as well as

carrying it out, and that student has to come through with the clear aim of becoming a competent professional researcher.

**Conclusion**

Being a research supervisor confers power on the supervisor to direct and provide guidance to a doctoral student. How such power is managed accelerates or retards the success of a doctoral research. The much publicized withdrawal of doctoral students without completing their programmes are enough reasons to promote research mentoring as a way of managing power relations a research supervisor's knowledge, skill and experience, leadership, communication and students' responsibilities. The benefits of mentoring reported in the literature supports the need to manage power relations by implementing the enabling conditions for mentoring in doctoral research supervision.

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